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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISTANBUL 000047

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: IRAN/DIPLOMACY: FORMER IRANIAN MFA DG URGES
ENGAGEMENT BUT WARNS AGAINST BOLSTERING AHMADINEJAD

REF: A) 08 ISTANBUL 85 B) ISTANBUL 14

Classified By: Deputy Principal Officer Sandra Oudkirk; Reason 1.5 (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Kia Tabatabaee, a former Iranian MFA Director General now working for the "Developing Eight" (D8) organization in Istanbul, told us that Iran awaits US steps towards engagement. He urged the US and EU3 to put aside the nuclear issue "for a few months" and cooperate on regional issues like supporting Iraqi and Afghan elections and political development, stopping narcotics smuggling from Afghanistan, and sharing information on Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups targeting Iran and the US. But he cautioned against bilateral US-Iran meetings until after Iran's elections, so as not to bolster Ahmadinejad's chances. He handicapped the current Iranian presidential candidates, pointing to Tehran Mayor Ghalibaf as most able to beat Ahmadinejad. Tabatabaee was an engaging, polished, talkative interlocutor with whom we will stay in contact absent instructions to the contrary. End Summary.

¶2. (C) In a January 28 meeting in Istanbul with the (Iranian) Director of the Organization of the Developing Eight States' (D8) Secretariat in Istanbul to discuss D8 issues (septel), former Iranian MFA Director General for Economic Affairs and Ambassador to Russia and to Iran's UN Missions Geneva Kia Tabatabaee initiated a discussion of US-Iran relations and of Iran's presidential elections. Given Tabatabaee's official status (according to him) since January 1, 2009 of being an accredited international organization employee and no longer on the Iranian government's payroll as a seconded diplomat to the D8, we engaged him in the discussion. (Comment: We had agreed to meet with Tabatabaee to discuss D8 issues at the suggestion of D8 Secretary General Dipo Alam (ref A), a friend and contact of the Consulate's, following assurances of Tabatabaee's non-GOI status.)

US-Iran relations: Find common regional goals

¶3. (C) Noting that he had just carefully read the transcript of President Obama's January 28 interview with Al-Arabiya, Tabatabaee made a fist with his hand, then theatrically reached over, unclenched his fist, offered his hand, and said "Enough is enough. Iran wants to engage." He said the President's decision to speak first to Al-Arabiya was a brilliant one. We queried how he thought future engagement between the US and Iran might proceed, and on what topics. Tabatabaee suggested that both sides need to "exploit common interests and goals with regard to regional issues, cooperate on those, and use that cooperation to build naturally towards engaging on the central issue of Iranian-US relations."

¶4. (C) Tabatabaee pointed to the desire for stable, peaceful, successful elections in both Afghanistan and in

Iraq in 2009 as a shared goal that would benefit from joint Iranian-US cooperation and would bolster stability in both countries. "Such stability is of even greater national interest to Iran than it is to you." He added that US cooperation with Iran and other regional countries under a UN umbrella to fight narcotics smuggling from Afghanistan would also be warmly welcomed in Iran both by the GOI and the population. Tabatabaee also suggested that sharing information to combat Al Qaeda and "other extremists in the region that target both Iran and the U.S." would be a valuable, mutually beneficial area for cooperation.

Consultation and cooperation between US and Iranian diplomats on these issues, even in a multilateral setting, would generate significant confidence on the GOI's part. "Focusing on common interests and working pragmatically with each other on those issues would prove your peaceful intentions towards Iran and at the same time defuse some common threats." The Iranian people, he offered, were expecting no less from "their great hope, President Obama."

But "put aside the nuclear issue for a few months"

¶15. (C) We pointed out that any engagement with Iran would need to include a serious effort on Iran's part to comply with UNSC obligations with regard to its nuclear activities. Tabatabaee instead urged that the nuclear issue "be put to the side, even if only for a few months," claiming that every time Washington or an EU3 capital makes a statement about the nuclear issue it bolsters Ahmadinejad because it reinforces the domestic perception that he is effectively defying a Western attempt to limit Iran's sovereignty. He asserted

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that the issue was not so time sensitive that it must always "take center stage and crowd out issues that we can work together on." Tabatabaee also suggested that if the US and EU3 were clearly to refrain from raising the nuclear issue in public speeches and discussions of Iran in coming weeks, the West would likely see signs of Iran's enrichment-related activities slowing down considerably, and "Ahmadinejad won't have a reason to harp about it on the campaign trail."

And no bilateral meetings before June

¶16. (C) Somewhat at odds with what we have heard recently from several other experienced Iranian interlocutors (ref B), however, Tabatabaee urged that the USG not move quickly into bilateral engagement with Iran. He urged Washington to delay any one-on-one meetings with Iranian counterparts until after Iran's June presidential elections. "Setting the table beforehand and even meeting multilaterally to cooperate on regional issues would be prudent," he explained, "but if high-level American and Iranian officials meet each other bilaterally before June elections, Ahmadinejad's hand will be strengthened."

Slamming Ahmadinejad

¶17. (C) Tabatabaee launched into a surprisingly candid critique of Ahmadinejad, skewering him over both his domestic and foreign policy records. "Now that I am no longer an Iranian government employee, I am free to speak my mind: he has been terrible for Iran." Tabatabaee admitted that his dislike of Ahmadinejad was cemented when Ahmadinejad ordered the MFA in summer 2006 to remove senior diplomats considered by Iran's hard-liners to be too westernized, including Tabatabaee.

Iran's presidential elections

¶18. (C) Asked if the international community may have to learn to live with four more years of Ahmadinejad, Tabatabaee

demurred that it was "four months too soon to predict the election outcome", though he proceeded anyway to handicap the race as it currently stands (including key figures who haven't yet declared their candidacy): Former Speaker Kerroubi, considered a reformist, is "not realistic enough to see he can't make it to the second round, and besides, the time of clerics as presidents is past; Iranian voters give no extra credit now to the clergy." Former Prime Minister Mousavi "is a credible candidate and would make a capable president but most Iranian voters are too young to remember him. He is from the too-far past." Former President Khatami, "the one and only, as his supporters call him, is too afraid of risking his reputation and will not enter the race unless Supreme Leader Khamenei gives him a public endorsement, which is unlikely. Even if he runs, there are too many former reformers who still have not forgiven his weakness in failing to confront the hard-liners who neutered his presidency." Tehran Mayor Ghalibaf "is the only opposition candidate who can appeal both to conservatives and to reformers, and therefore who can beat Ahmadinejad. He is a strong leader, and if he can run an effective campaign he can win." Tabatabaee described a recent incident from a January 10 meeting between Ahmadinejad and Ghalibaf to discuss Tehran's traffic problems. A serious argument broke out between the two, according to Tabatabaee, with Ghalibaf physically confronting the smaller Ahmadinejad until aides restrained them both. "Ghalibaf is not afraid of Ahmadinejad; he dislikes him and wants very much to run against him and beat him."

¶9. (C) Having offered up Ghalibaf as the best candidate to beat Ahmadinejad Tabatabaee acknowledged that "nobody knows what will happen; it all depends on who the Supreme Leader endorses. The elections results will tilt that way." He noted that "more than usual there is a lot happening behind the curtain that even Iranian observers don't understand." He noted that Iran's Military Chief of Staff earlier this week was quoted in an Iranian newspaper strongly endorsing Ahmadinejad. According to Tabatabaee the letter prompted a harsh rebuttal from Kerroubi, accusing the official of illegal interference in an Iranian election. Tabatabaee concluded that "something is definitely cooking behind the scenes" and cautioned that many more "elections twists" are likely to appear in the coming weeks.

Comment and bio notes

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¶10. (C) Tabatabaee was engaging, polished, and smooth. He is clearly well-practiced at gauging carefully and delivering effectively whatever messages he thinks will win over his interlocutor. He speaks excellent English laced with American idioms presumably gleaned from his time as a university student in Texas. He has been the D8 Secretariat Director since August 2006 (as a consolation prize from the MFA following his forced exit as MFA DG for Economic Affairs). He has two children -- a son in Switzerland and a daughter in university in Iran -- and a wife who lives in Tehran but flies monthly to Istanbul to see him.

¶11. (C) Politically, Tabatabaee made no effort to hide his strong support for Ghalibaf's candidacy. He joked that whether he stays as Director of the D8 Secretariat for three more years or returns to Iran in 2009 depends on whether Ahmadinejad or Ghalibaf wins the election. Given Tabatabaee's willingness to expound at length on Iranian politics and US-Iran relations, and in light of his MFA experience, we see Tabatabaee as potentially a very useful interlocutor and intend to stay in contact with him absent instructions to the contrary from the Department.

Wiener